

Program 9

Poème for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 25

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)

Composed in 1896.

Premiered in December 1896 in Nancy, with Eugène Ysaÿe as soloist.

Ernest Chausson was among the many talented and skillful composers who enriched French musical life during the last three decades of the 19th century, but whose work is little known outside that country. The members of this group, many under the tutelage and inspiration of César Franck, were united by their desire to elevate the eroded musical taste of the French public, which had for many years been in the thrall of the bloated operatic machines constructed by Meyerbeer and the featherweight operettas dispensed by Lecocq, Planquette and Offenbach. The band of Franckists was a fascinating musical motley: Guillaume Lekeu, with his mystical turn of mind and zealous adoration of the late works of Beethoven, whose promising flame was snuffed out at the age of just 24; Augusta Holmes, the female author of several operas and a staunch advocate of home rule for her native Ireland; Dynam-Victor Fumet, who, when he was not composing, drafted fiery political tracts advocating political anarchy and manufactured bombs to further his convictions; Joseph Guy Ropartz, a prolific composer who became more widely known as an educator; and others whose names are even less well remembered. The most famous among this coterie is Ernest Chausson, who has earned a place in the international musical consciousness with his Symphony in B-flat, *Poème for Violin*, *Concert for Violin and Piano* accompanied by String Quartet, and a handful of other finely crafted creations.

Chausson was the only surviving child of a wealthy Parisian building contractor who made a fortune in Haussmann's massive mid-19th-century renovations of the city. Young Ernest was tutored privately at home in a world of books and quiet where he had little contact with children of his own age, a circumstance that seems to have instilled a reflective disposition in the youngster. In a letter of 1876 to his godmother, Mme de Rayssac, he wrote, "This relative solitude, along with the reading of a few morbid books, caused me to acquire a fault: I was sad without knowing why, but firmly convinced that I had the best reason in the world for it." Such gentle melancholy was characteristic of Chausson throughout his life, and is reflected in many of his compositions. Chausson was eventually sent off to law school, from which he graduated in 1877, but he never lost his interest in art, literature and music, and in 1879, perhaps inspired by a new-found love of Wagner's music-dramas, he enrolled as a music student at the Paris Conservatoire. He began his studies with Massenet, but soon switched to Franck, whose devoted pupil he became. It was from Franck that Chausson learned the modesty, seriousness of purpose, and respect for the great masters that guided his work for the rest of his life.

In 1883, Chausson's musical studies were finished, and he married Jeanne Escudier, who bore him five children during the course of their happy, settled life together. Their spacious Paris home was the site for many gatherings of the French artistic elite: Manet, Renoir, Degas, Rodin and Mallarmé regularly mingled with such prominent musicians as Franck, Chabrier, Dukas, Satie and Debussy. It was at those soirées that some of the stimulating interaction among the visual arts, literature, music and poetry that so influenced *fin-de-siècle* Parisian intellectual life took place. Chausson's house was always open to aspiring musicians, and he was generous with his encouragement of younger composers, most notably Debussy, with whom he became close friends. Chausson's inherited wealth relieved him of the worry of making a living from his compositions, though this advantage did not mean that he regarded his creative work lightly. If anything, he was perhaps too self-critical, and always took umbrage at accusations that he was an "amateur composer." His money allowed him to travel, and he was especially fond of visiting Brussels, where his works enjoyed a greater popularity than they did in Paris (Franck was a native of Belgium), and of spending the hot summer months in various country retreats which provided the peace that he found conducive to composing. It was on one of those rustic sojourns that he met his untimely death at the age of 44, when his speeding bicycle crashed into a wall, killing him instantly.

Chausson was, by all reports, a gentle, considerate, kind and somewhat shy man, who enjoyed health, wealth and a contented home life. Despite the halcyon circumstances of his personal situation, however, he was given to writing melancholy music, perhaps spurred by his occasional fits of depression. His colleague Vincent d'Indy said of him, "Chausson pondered at length over his works before writing them down, and touched them up meticulously afterward. For Chausson belonged to the strong race of those who suffer through their idea before producing it." In 1894, the composer himself wrote, "Good heavens, I know very well that I am what people call fortunate, almost frightfully so. And, doubtless, I would be too much so without this wretched, uneasy and violent brain of mine." Just as he was entering what should have been his most productive period, a passage into full maturity that would surely have pacified his "uneasy brain," his life was cut short. The epitaph that Franz Grillparzer devised for Franz Schubert's headstone seems not inappropriate as a memorial to Ernest Chausson: "Here lie rich treasure and still fairer hopes."

The *Poème for Violin and Orchestra* is one of Chausson's most successful works, and the touching story of its

publication is worth recounting. Isaac Albéniz, the Spanish composer, had been unhappy and bewildered during his student days in Paris. Chausson befriended, encouraged and supported him at the time, and Albéniz was determined to repay the favor. After Chausson finished *Poème* in 1896, he had some difficulty in having it accepted for publication. While touring Germany in the spring of the following year, Albéniz presented himself, with the manuscript of the still un-issued *Poème* tucked under his arm, to a representative of the eminent music publishing firm of Breitkopf und Härtel in Leipzig. Breitkopf refused to publish the score unless Albéniz offered to underwrite the cost of the venture, which he gladly did. In addition, Albéniz provided 300 marks which Breitkopf was to pass on to his mentor as a royalty. Chausson never discovered the scheme. Chausson, who had never been treated kindly by publishers, was overwhelmed when Albéniz informed him of his good fortune.

Poème shows the lyricism, advanced harmonic style presaging the Impressionists and soulful melancholy that mark Chausson's best works. Though unified through melodic reiteration, the score does not follow any traditional Classical formal model, but is rather constructed around lines of rising and falling tension. Wrote the British critic and composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "The prevailing mood of Chausson's music is an entrancing melancholy, tender and twilit, a melancholy free from whine or morbid sentiment, [which] is expressed in the terms of the utmost sensitive refinement, subtle beauty and aristocratic distinction of manner."

Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. Posth.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Composed in 1907-1908.

Premiered on May 30, 1958 in Basle, Switzerland, conducted by Paul Sacher with Hans-Heinz Schneeberger as soloist.

The year 1907, when he was 26, was a crucial time both personally and professionally for Béla Bartók. In January, he was appointed to the faculty of the Budapest Academy of Music as teacher of piano, and he soon became recognized as one of Hungary's most talented keyboard virtuosos and pedagogues. He had also by that time begun to establish himself as a composer and a folk music researcher, though his original works, largely under the sway of the waning German Romanticism of Strauss and Reger, had not yet revealed his distinctive creative personality. He was then also much occupied with thoughts of Hungarian nationalism (he even eschewed business suits for a short period in favor of traditional peasant dress), and the manner in which the music he was documenting on his research trips through the Transylvanian countryside could be most effectively incorporated into his original works. These matters — the advancement of his professional life as a composer, performer and teacher; the foundation of a personal compositional language; the way to mold his music to his patriotic feelings — became enmeshed that summer in an affair of the heart, his first serious love entanglement.

While on vacation in the town of Jászberény, a short distance east of Budapest, Bartók met the nineteen-year-old Hungarian violinist Stefi Geyer, a brilliant student of Jenő Hubay, his colleague at the Budapest Academy, and fell in love with her. So stirred was Bartók by this encounter that by July 1st, when he left Jászberény for a country holiday with Stefi and her brother, he had sketched out a theme which became the seed for a violin concerto inspired by, and conceived for, his new love. Bartók had to put aside Stefi's concerto for the following two months while he was collecting folk songs in Transylvania, but he took it up again when he returned to Budapest to begin the fall term at the Academy. He wrote long and ardent letters to Stefi during the next few months, telling her about his folk-music research, his teaching, his religious beliefs ("By the time I was 23, I was an atheist," he confided to the devoutly Catholic girl), and the progress on her concerto. He told her that he planned the work in the conventional three movements, each of which would be a musical portrait of an aspect of her personality: "the idealized Stefi, celestial and inward ... the cheerful, witty, amusing Stefi ... the indifferent, cool and silent Stefi." By February 5, 1908, however, when he had completed the first two movements, he had come to realize that the gulf separating their religious beliefs could never be bridged and that their romantic relationship was over. In his last, sad letter to her, in March, he wrote, "I have begun a quartet [No. 1]; the first theme is [borrowed from] the theme of the second movement of the Violin Concerto; this is my funeral dirge." He sent her the score of the Concerto, which she never performed and he never mentioned again — he called his 1938 work in the form simply "Violin Concerto," dismissing the existence of this earlier piece. Bartók expiated some of his hurt over the ending of this affair of the heart by also working "Stefi's theme," as he referred to the motive of rising and falling arpeggios that opens the Concerto, into the orchestral *Two Portraits* and the *Fourteen Bagatelles* and *Ten Easy Pieces* for piano. In August 1909, Bartók, apparently recovered from his passion for Stefi, married Márta Ziegler, a sixteen-year-old student of his at the Academy. He remained in touch with Stefi after she moved to Vienna in 1911 and Switzerland eight years later, where she married the composer-pianist Walter Schulthess: he corresponded with the couple on occasion, and visited them during his trips to Switzerland in the 1920s and 1930s. When Stefi died, in 1956, her estate left the manuscript of the Concerto to the conductor Paul Sacher, a stalwart champion of Bartók (he commissioned the *Divertimento* and the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*), with the instruction that he should give its first performance with the Swiss violinist Hans-Heinz Schneeberger. Bartók's Violin Concerto No. 1 was therefore heard for the first time in Basle on May 30, 1958, exactly a half-century after it was composed.

Bartók broke off the Violin Concerto No. 1 after completing just two of its proposed three movements for reasons both personal and musical. Personally, it is doubtful that he could have written music convincingly depicting “the indifferent, cool and silent Stefi,” even though they had broken up by the time that he would have begun the finale. (She said such a thing would have been “hateful.”) Musically, Bartók came to realize that the slow-fast pairing of the two finished movements created its own pleasing whole, one modeled on Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, whose structure grew from the Hungarian national dance, the *Czardas*, which alternates between a slow section — “*Lassu*” — and a fast one — “*Friss*.” The opening *Andante* (music suggesting “the young girl whom Bartók had loved,” according to Ms. Geyer) is an expansive, tightly imitative treatment of “Stefi’s theme,” which is first given by the solo violin before being shared with the strings and then the full orchestra. The shape of the movement describes an “arch form,” beginning and ending quietly while reaching its expressive climax at the center, a symmetrical plan that was to pervade Bartók’s compositions for the remaining forty years of his creative life. The virtuosic second movement (which captures “the violinist whom Bartók had admired,” said Ms. Geyer) is built in broad structural paragraphs that alternate the strongly rhythmic music of the opening with a more lyrical strain whose arpeggiated melody is derived from “Stefi’s theme.” Bartók exhibited considerable ingenuity here in transforming his motives, passing them through a wide range of settings that touch on scherzo, romance, jest, dance and other expressive and stylistic states. This Concerto is a work of youthful passion, almost Straussian in its rich textures and opulent harmonies, in which Bartók displayed both the roots and the promise of his unique musical personality.

Symphony No. 5, Op. 100

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Composed in 1944.

Premiered on January 12, 1945 in Moscow, conducted by the composer.

“In the Fifth Symphony I wanted to sing the praises of the free and happy man — his strength, his generosity and the purity of his soul. I cannot say I chose this theme; it was born in me and had to express itself.” The “man” that Prokofiev invoked in this description of the philosophy embodied in this great Symphony could well have been the composer himself. The work was written in the summer of 1944, one of the happiest times he knew. His home life following marriage to his second wife four years earlier was contented and fulfilling; he was the most famous and often-performed of all Soviet composers; and Russia was winning World War II. In fact, the success of the work’s premiere was buoyed by the announcement immediately before the concert that the Russian army had just scored a resounding victory on the River Vistula. The composer’s mind was reflected in the fluency and emotional depth of his music.

The Fifth Symphony was composed in short score at lightning speed within a single month in 1944, though Prokofiev admitted collecting material for the work for some time on the sketch pads he always carried to jot down ideas as they occurred to him. This Symphony, his first work in the form since he had written the Fourth for the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1930-1931, was composed at a retreat in Ivanovo, some distance east of Moscow. The Soviet Composers’ Union provided this country house as a peaceful refuge for musicians in which to gather and share their ideas, as well as for a quiet place to work. Glière, Shostakovich, Kabalevsky, Khachaturian and others were already in attendance there when Prokofiev arrived early in the summer of 1944. These others were content to take advantage of the restful nature of the surroundings, but Prokofiev was not, and Khachaturian recalled, “The regularity with which he worked amazed us all!” Prokofiev was never late for breakfast, always went promptly to his studio at ten, observed a strict schedule for his walks and tennis matches, and, at day’s end, insisted that the inmates show each other exactly what they had accomplished that day. It is not difficult to imagine a certain relief among his fellows when Prokofiev chose to finish the orchestration of the Fifth Symphony in Moscow.

Prokofiev never hinted that there was a program underlying the Fifth Symphony except to say that “it is a symphony about the spirit of man.” During the difficult war years, Soviet music, according to Boris Schwartz, “was meant to console and uplift, to encourage and exhort; nothing else mattered.” Though some, like Martin Bookspan, find “ominous threats of brutal warfare” lurking beneath the surface of Prokofiev’s music, there is really nothing here to match such symphonies born of the violence of war as Shostakovich’s Seventh or Vaughan Williams’ Fourth. Rather it is a work that reflects the composer’s philosophy after he returned to Russia in the 1930s from many years of living in western Europe and America. In his 1946 autobiographical sketch, he wrote, “It is the duty of the composer, like the poet, the sculptor or the painter, to serve his fellow men, to beautify human life and point the way to a radiant future. Such is the immutable code of art as I see it.” The Fifth Symphony is therefore addressed to the wide masses of the Soviet public, but couched in the venerable terms of the classical symphony, as was Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5 of 1937. Both of these well-known works look back to the formal models of Beethoven and the grand style of Tchaikovsky for their musical inspiration, but both also speak with the distinctive modern voices of their creators.

Prokofiev’s Fifth Symphony is characterized by a rich vein of melody combined with his distinctively pungent harmonic palette in full, sturdy scoring. The opening movement is a large sonata form in moderate tempo that begins

without introduction. The wide-ranging main theme is presented simply by flute and bassoon before being taken up by the strings. An arched-shaped complementary idea is given by tuba and other low instruments, and is combined with the main theme. The flute and oboe sing the lyrical second theme above a trembling, arpeggiated accompaniment in the strings. Two brief motives close the exposition. One, characterized by its dotted rhythms, arrives on the crest of the movement's first climax; the other is an angular, skittish fragment tossed off by high woodwinds, violins and cellos. The development, which rises from the low strings through the entire orchestra, gives prominence in its first portion to the opening theme and the skittish motive from the end of the exposition; it later focuses on the second theme and the arch-shaped complementary melody. The recapitulation is heralded by the stentorian sounds of the brass choir announcing the main theme. The movement is capped by a majestic coda that grows from the low summons of the trombones and tuba, buttressed by the rumbling of the bass drum and timpani, to an overwhelming wave of sound in its final measures. It was this section of the Symphony that most moved the audience at the work's premiere, prompting the composer's biographer, Israel Nestyev, to write, "This is perhaps the most impressive episode of the entire Symphony for it embodies with the greatest clarity the work's highest purpose – glorification of the strength and beauty of the human spirit."

The second movement, the Symphony's scherzo, is one of those pieces that Prokofiev would have classified as "motoric": an incessant two-note rhythmic motive drives the music forward through its entire first section. The principal theme arises from the solo clarinet, and much of what follows is a series of loose variations on this cheeky melody. The movement's central section is framed by a bold, strutting phrase from the woodwinds adorned with the piquant "wrong notes" that spice so much of Prokofiev's quick music. The clarinets and violas play the main theme of this middle section over another mechanized rhythm that gives these pages, despite their triple meter, the nature of a propulsive march. The strutting phrase reappears. The following section begins slowly, and, like the stoking of some giant engine, gradually gains momentum until the opening scherzo returns to bring the movement to a riveting close.

The brooding third movement is in a large three-part design. The outer sections are supported by the deliberate rhythmic tread of the low instruments used as underpinning for a plaintive melody initiated by the clarinets. A sweeping theme begun by the tuba serves as the basis for the middle section. An extended, searing climax links this section with the return of the plaintive melody high in the strings. The touching coda is suspended in the piccolo and strings high above a shimmering string accompaniment.

The finale opens with a short introduction comprising two gestures based on the main theme of the first movement: a short woodwind phrase answered by the strings, and a chorale for cellos. The main body of the movement is a sonata-rondo propelled by yet another insistent rhythmic motive. The movement accumulates a large amount of thematic material as it progresses, though it is the solo clarinet playing the main theme which begins each of the important structural sections of the form. A furious, energetic coda ignites several of the movement's themes into a grand closing blaze of orchestral color to conclude one of the supreme orchestral works of the 20th century.

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